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EDITORIAL

THE SMALL FARMER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

FROM Granite, Okla., this letter of criticism and remonstrance has run in:
DAILY PEOPLE
Granite, Oklahoma, Jan. 24, 1909.

To the Editor of *The People*, New York:

In the issue of the *Weekly People* of December 26, 1908, answering D.B.M. of Granite, Okla., you state that the class interests of the wage worker and the small farmer are not identical, and compare the small farmer with the small factory owner and shopman, stating that in disposing of his products he does not sell his labor-power. You say that he may or may not employ labor, and if he doesn't, his earnings include only his own labor and surplus value, a fact which separates him from the wage-earner. You also state that in a literary sense, their interests are said to be the same, but it is largely sentimental and getting away from science, and that this sort of thing is not organizable. The process of reasoning by which you arrive at the contradictory and erroneous conclusions displays a lack of knowledge of the conditions that surround the small farmer of the present day. This compels me to take issue with you and criticize your deductions.

I am one of the many Socialists, who, at the risk of being called unscientific, believe that Lassalle's Iron Law of Wages is being applied by the capitalist system as mercilessly to the small farmer and renter, as it is to the proletariat.

In a life of fifty-five years I have had experience on both sides of the fence. Prior to the A.R.U. strike in 1894, I was a wage worker, since then I have become a small farmer, and in all candor must admit that as a wage earner I enjoyed more of the fruits of labor and worked less hours than I do now as a farmer. In distribution exploitation is just as great as in production. The farmers of the South are exploited to the limit. Our staple crops have time and again been so manipulated by the system that it required the combined help of our wives and children to eke out our existence, and that by doubling up on the wage earner's eight-hour day.

Your assumption that we may or may not employ labor is a joke on us because of the fact that if we do employ labor at prevailing rates we have frequently to sell below the cost of production, and face a deficit at pay day. Thus our charitable instincts are somewhat limited, and we prefer, when

nature is bountiful, and the crop larger than we can gather, to make a present of the surplus to the wage worker rather than see it go to waste. Then the system rewards our philanthropy, as a rule, with overproduction, which is just as effective in reducing our standard of living as a reduction of wages or the loss of a job is to the wage worker.

As workers on the farm our time for the study of the classics is very limited. What we have done in this line leads us to the conclusion that mathematics is the only branch of knowledge that is unassailable and absolutely correct, hence our presumption in taking issue with our city comrades when they term all farmers as capitalists. In the application of science to modern Socialism and its relation to any body of workers, deductions, to be scientifically correct, must be based on the general conditions surrounding those workers.

Now, what is the actual condition of the small farmer? In Oklahoma, a state supposed to be one of the El Dorados for the farmer, the county records show from eighty to eighty-five per cent. of their imaginary titles held by the suffrage of capitalism. One of our city comrades, an agent of capitalism, and he only one of the many hangers-on that are in this county, loaned out recently in ten days' time over \$60,000 to farmers, mostly to those already hopelessly in debt. They are forced to increase their loans.

Modern Socialism is the direct product of the intelligent recognition of the class struggle, and its mission is to free all the workers from exploitation. This being so, and believing that the capitalist system in the United States has so changed the status of the small farmer and renter that he is no longer an exploiter of labor, but rather a victim of exploitation, we think we are justified in believing that his class interests are identical with the wage worker.

I further believe that the time, predicted by Marx and Engels, for the establishment of industrial armies, especially of agriculture, is close at hand, and in this connection I will say that in the final struggle against capitalism, the small farmer will be largely in evidence shoulder to shoulder with the proletariat demanding the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class.

Yours in revolt,
JOHN G. WILLS.

Viewed at from one angle of vision it would seem ungracious, if not worse, impolitic, to controvert our correspondent's posture. It may be asked, Why enter into a theoretic dispute with a man who not only pronounces himself a Socialist, but evidently demands the unconditional surrender to the capitalist class? Suppose he is theoretically wrong regarding class interests; he lands right. Leave well enough alone.

Such a policy would be wise to pursue were the Movement now in its "home

stretch.” When a Movement is well underway, matters not what heterogeneous views it attracts. These will not be able to turn, or even affect, its course. Its own impetus will guard it against danger. Otherwise when a Movement, as is the case with the Socialist in America, is still in its formative period. Under these circumstances, though the task remain ungracious, it is preeminently politic to controvert erroneous principle.

Before taking up our correspondent’s central point, it will be well to dispose of two statements with which he introduces his argument.

First—*The People’s* Letter-Box answer quoted from in condensed form, was, in full, as follows:

“The interest of the wage earner and the small farmer, understanding by that their class interests, are not identical—any more than are the interests of the wage earner and the small factory or shop man, and for identical reasons. The small factory and small shop man may and does work. He does not live on dividends. But he does not sell his labor power. He sells other goods. He may and he may not hire labor. If he does, his income consists of the price of his goods, in which are included his own labor, the labor of his wage slaves and his surplus value. Clearly, in such a case, his interest and that of his wage earners are not one. If he employs no wage earners, his earnings include only his own labor and his surplus value—a fact that separates him from the wage earner, who never pockets surplus value.

“In a literary sense the small farmer, like the small shop keeper, is said to have the same interests as the wage earner, seeing both are kept with their noses to the grindstone. But the moment one gets into literature and away from science there is no end to sentiment. Hence there are Socialists who are seen weeping over the mental and moral hardships Rockefeller has to endure. That sort of thing is not organizable.”

Our correspondent pronounces these conclusions “contradictory and erroneous.” As to their “erroneousness,” we shall consider that presently. As to their “contradictoriness,” wherein does the contradiction consist? Is it perhaps, “contradictory” to say, in one place, that the interests of the small farmer and the wage earner are not identical, and, in another place, to say that, in a “literary sense,” in “literature,” the small farmer and the wage earner are said to have the same interests? Hardly. “Literature” is one thing, notably hyperbolic of expression; “science” another, necessarily strict in terms. Obviously, by contrasting the

phraseology of “literature” with that of “science,” the weakness of the former was pointed out, instead of a contradiction incurred.

Second—Our correspondent proclaims his adherence to Lassalle’s “Iron Law of Wages.” With a respected bow to Lassalle for his otherwise great services, the Socialist Movement has long ago discarded his “Iron Law of Wages” as untenable. More lies in this than may seem on the surface. ’Tis well to grapple therewith. What was Lassalle’s “Iron Law of Wages”? Condensed in a few words it amounted to this: “If the supply of Labor is plentiful wages will be low; low wages will reduce the Labor population; a reduced Labor population, by offering a lower supply, will cause wages to rise again; higher wages will again raise the supply of Labor, by increasing the Labor population; whereupon the renewed plentiful supply of Labor will once more reduce wages,” and so on in an iron circle forever. This theory drew its sap from two other theories—the Malthusian theory of population and food, and the theory of the “wages fund”—both of them social and economic fallacies. Along with Lassalle’s “Iron Law of Wages,” the two theories that served for its foundation, have been cast by Socialism on the rubbish heap of exploded notions. So all-around untenable is the Lassallean theory that we must confess ourselves at a loss to understand our correspondent’s announcement that Lassalle’s Iron Law of Wages is being applied to him as a small farmer.

And now to the main question:

The starting point of our correspondent lies in the error of raising his own personal, private and exceptional virtues to the category of a FEATURE of his class—the small farmer or renter. Did our esteemed correspondent enjoy the advantages of, say, this office, whither information flows in from as far West as California and Washington, as far South as Florida, as far East as Connecticut and Maine, as far North as Michigan, etc., Oklahoma included,—did he enjoy that opportunity our correspondent would quickly realize his mistake.

From all parts of agricultural America letters come to this office conveying information that points to the conclusion that the small farmer, the same as his urban counterpart, the small industrialist, or shopkeeper, is the most greedy and grasping and grinding of employers. No such thing as their making “a present of the surplus to the wage worker.” And it stands to reason.

“Every mickle makes a muckle,” runs the Scotch adage. A large employer, whether industrial or agricultural, exploits so many wage slaves that it takes only a mickle from each to heap up a comfortable muckle for him—and even he wants more. With the small employer, whether agricultural or industrial, his wage slaves are so few that a mickle from each comes nowhere near making the desired muckle. He needs more than mickles—and the employe of the small employer, whether in country or town, is made to feel the fact.

Moreover, with regard to the farm-hand there is a circumstance that bears upon him with a weight not felt by his city cousin. We have no feudalism left in America. Nevertheless we have that left which flavored feudalism—the loneliness, or the “retirement,” as one may choose to call it, of country life. That ever adds grease to the elbow of Property, and intensifies helplessness, with its accompaniment of dependence, in the propertiless. Whatever the tribulations of the city, or industrial, wage slave are, the chances he has for justice in Court against his employer are such that the farm-hand substantially lacks. In farming districts either farmers or their close connections are the magistrates. In the eyes of these the farm-hand is a pariah. And so it happens that the employes of the small farmer are paid more poorly, are treated more harshly, are often even cheated of their wages, and deem themselves happy if they escape arrest as “vagrants,” a very common rural method to compel submission—and work.

But our esteemed correspondent should not need the detailed information of so well posted a place as this office to warn him as to the features of his class. There is a robust fact, accessible to the discernment of all. That fact is the congestion of cities—a congestion that arises, not from the immigration of what Socialist party men, like Guy Miller and Robert Hunter refer to with contempt as “the hordes of Europe and Asia,” but that arises from the mass emigration from the farm districts. Our city “breadlines” have been found to be made up very extensively of this element. What are they fleeing from? Surely not from a class treatment marked by the exceptional benevolence of our correspondent.

Our correspondent mentions the trials of the small farmer. He surely does not exaggerate. He could have said much more, and truthfully, too—but all falling wide of the mark.

Socialism has long pointed out the fact that whatever the tribulations of the wage slave may be, they are not to be compared with the mental tortures of the employer. Even a multimillionaire undergoes agonies, in his capacity of multimillionaire, that the fromhand-to-mouth living proletarian has no conception of. This fact has acted as a touchstone to distinguish the sentimentalist from the Socialist. While the fact has caused many a sentimentalist to tour the land weeping copious tears (and not always crocodile tears, either), over the sorrows of a Rockefeller, whom the sentimentalist would make still happier—while the fact under consideration has that effect upon the sentimentalist, it has a different effect upon the Socialist. To the Socialist the fact points out the superior mental state, that capitalism leaves and nurses the wage slave in, compared to the state of peculiar nervous and moral prostration to which it reduces its own particular pet, the capitalist. Him capitalism drives to cheat, and lie, and scheme, while it leaves its victim, the wage slave, free from the burden of responsibility, consequently, mentally at ease and morally undepraved—a pregnant truth from which flow pregnant conclusions, too numerous to mention at this place, and needing only to be hinted at.

Class features are stamped by material necessities, and these are determined by Property—large Property, small Property, or the absence of Property, wherewith to produce wealth. The class feature (regardless of exceptional individual virtues) of the small farmer is stamped by the material needs of his class. The material needs of the small farmer dictate to him low taxes, low railroad freight rates, etc.—all of which do not concern the workingman whose share in what he produces (his wages) is determined by the supply of and the demand for him in the Labor Market; and the material needs of the small farmer dictate to him low wages—a need that immediately sets him at fisticuffs with the workingman.

Exactly like the small industrialist, the small farmer is ground to dust between the upper mill-stone of large property and the lower mill-stone of the proletariat. This misleads his judgment, causing him to become the victim of a dangerous optical illusion—the illusion of one moment believing himself a proletarian, the next moment believing himself a victim of the proletariat.

Individuals who, like our correspondent, have so far emancipated themselves

from the fetters of their class instincts as to demand the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class, are fraught with a potentiality either for yeoman service to the Movement, or, be it said in all needed frankness, though not unkindness, for untold harm:—

Their potentiality for good lies in the measure that they will help bring home to their own class the fact that their class's miserable plight marks them a **CARICATURE OF CAPITALISM**, not an **AGGRAVATION OF PROLETARIANISM**; in the measure they will help draw sharp the line of their own class interests and thereby disclose the utter hopelessness of these, to say nothing of their iniquity; in the measure they help their own class to distinguish the socially, or economically sharply marked difference between the plucking to which they are themselves subjected by the upper capitalist, and the "exploitation" to which the proletariat is subjected by the whole capitalist class, themselves, small farmers, included. In the measure that men like our correspondent do these things will they secure the honest, because intelligent, and the intelligent, because honest co-operation of their class with the proletariat in the establishment of the Socialist Republic.

Their potentiality for harm, on the contrary, lies in the measure in which they will mistake their own private virtues for features of their class; blur the class line by a wrongful use of the technical term "exploitation"; and raise suffering to the category of an economic foundation for class identity. In the measure that these men do that they endanger the Movement that they themselves have at heart. The small farmer **CLASS** may be unintelligently attracted, Attracted unintelligently, it will bring its class instincts along; betray the proletariat, as the Kansas Populist farmers did soon as they secured office; and leave the proletariat in the lurch as the Populist farmers' Movement did the moment wheat went up to a dollar a bushel.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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